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Bones Found on Saipan Studied As Clue to Amelia Earhart's Fate

From News Dispatches

A University of California anthropologist is to begin a study next week of the skeletal remains of two bodies, possibly those of the long-missing aviatrix Amelia Earhart Putnam and her navigator, Fred Noonan.

The remains, including some dental work which may prove to be Noonan's, were disinterred from a shallow Saipan grave two months ago, climaxing a radio newsman's months-long effort to solve the mystery in which Miss Earhart's round-the-world flight ended on July 2, 1937. The bones are being flown from Guam to Berkeley to be studied by anthropologist Theodore D. McCown.

Fred Goerner, 36, a newsman for San Francisco radio station KCBS, told a news conference yesterday that information which led him to the jungle grave came from Thomas E. Devine, a businessman of West Haven, Conn.

Goerner said Cmdr. Paul Bridwell, Saipan's naval commandant, expressed to him a theory that Miss Earhart and Noonan were forced down in the Marshalls, then taken to Saipan where they were imprisoned.

Devine, a United States soldier with a post office unit on Saipan in 1944-45, said a native woman asked him one day if he was searching for a grave, and pointed out the shallow burial place to him. But he said he did not connect the grave with the disappearance of the fliers until years later.

Armed with this information, Goerner formed an expedition which came upon the burial site Sept. 21.

"Excavating in the vicinity where the war-destroyed city of Sarapan once was," Goerner said, "we found a shallow, unmarked grave containing the remains of a man and a woman.

"From teeth uncovered, doctors indicated they were Caucasians and quite possibly those of Miss Earhart and Noonan. But we are not sure these are the remains."

Goerner said Cmdr. Bridwell told him: "I think they went down in the Marshalls, close to Howland Island, were captured, taken to Yap, and then brought to Saipan."

The bodies had been buried only two feet deep, in Japanese fashion.

"Miss Earhart and Noonan may have been kept on Saipan for a year or more," Goerner said. "I was told Miss Earhart died of dysentery and, after her death, Noonan was executed by Samurai sword."

There were no dental plates as such, but the teeth had fillings indicating the work of American dentists.

No one had done a thorough job of checking information on Miss Earhart's last flight, including reports of intercepted messages, presumably from the Japanese, which were never made public.

Miss Earhart's sister, Mrs. Albert Morrissey of Medford, Mass., expressed little confidence that the remains were those of the flier. She said there was no known dental chart of Miss Earhart.

Goerner said Dr. James Scott of Palm Springs, Calif., might have Noonan's chart.

Saipan is 2275 miles from Howland Island, which was the fliers' destination after they took off from Lae, New Guinea, for the Pacific Ocean legs of their flight. Their last messages indicated their belief that they were close to Howland.

Forty-six minutes before their last message Miss Earhart told the United States Coast Guard Cutter Itasca, standing by at Howland, "we are circling but cannot hear you." Noonan had estimated previously they were within 100 miles of Howland.

Cmdr. W. K. Thompson of the Itasca said, "at the end Miss Earhart talked so rapidly as to be almost incoherent." He said the plane's radio was loudest when it sent the "circling" message and he believed it was closest to Howland at that time.

On-the-spot searchers at the time believed the flight must have ended in the sea near Howland.

In Baltimore, Capt. Irving Johnson, who spent many years searching for Amelia Earhart, discounted the idea that her remains had been found.

"It's most unlikely," he said. "the Japanese were questioned closely about this after the war when they had absolutely nothing to hide, and they contended they knew nothing of Miss Earhart. There is a remote possibility, but . . ."

Johnson said he had access to the complete file on Miss Earhart in the war plans office where he worked. He said there was no evidence of any intercepted Japanese messages dealing with the disappearance and no evidence that she might have been captured by the Japanese.